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Problems involved in evaluating preservice methods courses, such as the difficulty of isolating the specific contribution of a single course, are discussed. The training factor of a methods course must be distinguished from the selection factor influencing the capabilities of a student population. Methods courses should be evaluated if they are to be effectively improved. Several ways of evaluating courses are described and evaluated. An approach to evaluating the course through classroom performance and two suggestions for research studies are presented. Seven references are included. (KJ)

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EVALUATING A PRESERVICE METHODS COURSE

For those who seek the answer to evaluation problems, I suggest you may wish to leave now, for I certainly will disappoint you. To those of you who remain, I can hope that some of the thoughts that follow may give us some ideas that might not otherwise have occurred. At best, we may spark some thoughtful reassessment of our own approaches to evaluating our particular preservice reading course.

Some Problems in Course Evaluation

The problems involved in evaluating a course of any kind are hardly simple ones. The issues before us in assessing the

effectiveness of a methods course are even more bewildering than those in evaluating a content course. With a content course, the instructor may judge how effectively students have learned the subject matter and perhaps how their thinking has been affected. But because a professional methods course must educate for application of what is learned to the classroom situation, the instructor must include an evaluation of this latter ability as well as the factors content instructors must consider. What must we take into account within this constellation of diverse factors?

First, it is important to acknowledge that evaluating a single preservice methods course outside the framework of a total preservice program is in itself questionable. How does one measure a part without knowing how the total program is operating? Perhaps it's analogous to checking only the blood pressure of a patient without looking at his age, physical size, sex and other pertinent details. In the business of teacher-education, we are turning out a "whole" teacher, and we must keep this concept in mind. Any evaluation must be made, then, in terms of the objectives of a total preservice program. And any course must keep in mind the objectives of the program and should build experiences designed to accomplish those objectives. This assumes that there is a total ideational framework to which a department adheres and that some

over-all conceptualization of what kind of teacher the college wishes to turn out has been formulated. Each instructor of each professional course would then insure that his specific objectives are in accord with ~~the~~ and supplement the larger design.

That we can make a difference in at least one dimension of the preservice teacher is stated by Gage, who says, "We know that we can markedly influence prospective teachers' conceptions of their roles, because teachers from one college differ markedly in such conceptions from those trained at another college with a different orientation toward the teacher's role."[1] The point

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[1] Nathaniel Gage. "Psychological Theory and Empirical Research for Teacher Education," in Freedom With Responsibility in Teacher Education. Seventeenth Yearbook - 1964 Annual Meeting, The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Chicago: AACTE, 1964; 94-105.

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is that part of any evaluation of a preservice professional course of any kind is finding out in some way 1) whether its objectives are compatible with those of the over-all program and 2) how and if it contributes appropriately to the total teacher preparation program.

In a cohesive, well-defined program, it would be difficult to isolate the specific contribution of a single course to the teachers's total growth. Ideally, when teaching reading, the

good classroom teacher is incorporating principles of child growth and development, learning theory and curriculum development. Ideally, too, the instructor for the preservice course is pointing out how principles from allied fields apply to the teaching of reading.

A second problem to be considered in evaluating methods courses has been raised by Spalding[2] among others. He pointed

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[2] Willard B. Spalding. "Evaluation of Proposals for Change in Teacher Education," in Changes in Teacher Education: An Appraisal, National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, Washington, D.C.: National Education Association of the United States, 1964; 37-49.

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out the necessity for distinguishing between the training factor and the selection factor. Some high schools point with pride to the number of their students who rank high on merit scholarship awards of various kinds. They interpret this achievement as meaning that their program is a highly effective one. In actuality, the program may be superior, mediocre, or inferior. It may be that what is outstanding about the school is the ability of the student population. Similarly, in colleges preparing teachers the quality of the product turned out by the program reflects to a large extent the quality of the student attracted to the program. Any evaluation must, therefore, be made in the light of the capabilities

as well as the limitations of the college's population. In general, better teachers of reading do come, should come and will continue to come from institutions where the screening procedures are such that they have a select group of students to work with. Because of this factor of selection, as well as the many other variables interacting in a given situation, the college instructor of a preservice reading methods course can neither take complete praise nor complete blame for the product. The fact that graduates of a particular institution are doing a poor job of reading instruction cannot be linked to the quality of the preservice reading methods course alone. The relationship is not one-to-one.

The Need to Evaluate

To this point we might feel justified in asking ourselves whether there is any way in which a course can be evaluated and, indeed, whether one should even bother. Presumably, and with some evidence to back the notion, professional courses do make a difference in teaching ability.[3] Why then bother to evaluate?

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[3] John R. Barry, "Does Professional Preparation Make a Difference?" Journal of Teacher Education, 13 (December, 1962), 386-95.

In a survey of attitudes toward education courses and academic

courses, Preston[4] found education courses coming out second best for a number of reasons. Included among the reasons given for disliking education courses were undesirable repetition; thin, inadequate content; too much theory; and lack of interest and inspiration.

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[4] Ralph C. Preston, "Education Graduates View Education and Academic Courses." School and Society, 92 (Summer, 1964), 233-37.

Methods courses--all courses--need to be evaluated if they are to be most effectively improved. Evaluation can serve to keep the college instructor alert to the needs and interests of his students and to his effectiveness in meeting these. It can also help him develop some objective measure of how well he is meeting the aims of his course. As such, evaluation serves a feedback function. Additionally, it can generate change by making the teacher aware of areas of strengths and weaknesses in his course. The evaluation of instruction would help him determine what he is contributing to the student's learning. It would also help him differentiate between techniques and practices which are effective and those which are inadequate or inappropriate.

For the rest of this paper, I should like to offer some possible ways of evaluating preservice reading methods courses. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach will be considered.

Immediate Evaluation of the Course

Let us consider first the immediate evaluation of the course itself.

Although student evaluations of a course are frowned on by many writers, they can, nevertheless, offer us considerable insight. Gustad[5] pointed out that students are "probably reasonably

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[5] John W. Gustad, "Evaluation of Teaching Performance: Issues and Possibilities," in Calvin B.T. Lee (Ed.), Improving College Teaching. Washington, D.C.: American Council of Education, 1967; 265-81.

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good sources of information when they are asked the right questions." (p. 276) He noted that they usually are the only direct observers of the instructor, other evaluation being second-hand or based on information obtained other than through observation. One criterion of effective teaching is whether or not the experience has been an enjoyable one. Gustad felt that students ought to enjoy the experience. In addition, Gustad suggested students could report on 1) their own degree of interest, 2) whether they were motivated to do more than was required, and 3) whether the instructor interested them in taking additional work in the field.

Critics of student evaluation contend that students give too much weight to personality of the instructor and that, because

they are not knowledgeable within a given area, they cannot be critical evaluators of their instructor's scholarship within his field. Others would tend to refute some of these arguments as does Gustad.

A discussion of one attempt to have students evaluate methods courses pointed up some of the procedural problems encountered in a particular situation.[6] While the purpose of the article was

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[6] A. F. Blackman, J. L. Fletcher, and S. M. Yanofsky, "Students Rate their Profs and Courses," Phi Delta Kappan, 48 (February, 1967), 266-69.

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different from our purpose and while a more sophisticated approach than is suggested here was followed, several useful ideas were presented. The suggestion that the evaluation concentrate on instructional techniques and over-all rationale merits careful thought. In addition to the focuses suggested in the article, there should be some focus on the actual content of the course and on students' reactions to various aspects.

The use of some form of classroom behavior analysis schedules may be helpful tools for evaluating certain types of class activities. The instructor may wish to train the class in using one of the analysis schedules and then ask a different student to appraise each of various class sessions.

Audio tape-recording of class sessions can be useful. Of special interest to the instructor might be the number of questions asked, the amount of talking done by the instructor and his receptivity to comments from students.

Listening to oneself is often a painful but revealing process. An instructor may wish to use the the tape reocrder for numerous other purposes than for self-evaluation. The recorder should be used often enough to "take the chill off" its use. The teacher becomes accustomed to hearing himself and can move past the initial stage of embarrassment that besets most of us. Perhaps one could start with recording a session for which he felt particularly well-prepared and about which he was particularly enthusiastic. A similar taping might be done at a time when his interest in the session was not especially high. Thus some evidence of both the best and the poorest lessons might be available for comparison.

Although the tape recorder has obvious limitations, its use may "clue us in" on certain strengths and weaknesses in our class presentation. When video-taping becomes less expensive, we may be able to add visual data to our auditory records, thereby giving us direct feedback on some of our peculiarities that might be inappropriate for our purpose and others which might be interfering with the operation of our classroom.

Another means of evaluating the instructor's classroom effectiveness might be the use of colleagues as observers in one's classroom. An exchange of visits with colleagues teaching similar courses on the same or even different campuses might result in an exchange of ideas that would improve one's teaching. The initial emphasis, however, must be on the college preservice instructor as his own evaluator. Provided we are reasonably open-minded and honest with ourselves in self-evaluation, this way is both more comfortable for most of us and probably more effective. When we have experienced the self-evaluation process, we may wish to involve others in the procedure.

Areas in which the college instructor needs to examine his course include his use of audio-visual aids and whether these are warranted and effective, his approach to student participation and his choice and variation of presentation method. Regarding the lecture method, there have been many appraisals, both negative and positive. The use of any one technique can, of course, be overdone. However, I doubt that we will discard the lecture. In certain instances it may well be the most useful and effective technique. As for student participation, there is ample evidence that active involvement makes for better learning than does passive non-involvement. However, it is the quality and kind of participation that is important. The propensity of instructors some years ago to

to permit the sharing of ignorance in the name of involvement did not always lead to high quality of student participation and resulted in little desirable change in behavior. On the other hand, there are those among us, who discourage our students from asking questions or who are loath to permit anyone to speak except ourselves. On this point, too, each instructor needs to analyze his own performance.

Simpson[7] presented a list of tools which the college or university instructor might use in self-evaluation. Some of these have already been mentioned. Others, reported as useful by college instructors, include the following:

1. Voluntary and continuing colleague discussions or seminars by instructors of a particular course.

2. A comparative check on efficiency using two different teaching approaches.

3. Yearly written "recap" on one's own activities and an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses.

We have not touched on evaluative discussions either with the total class or with concurrent small sub-groups. These sessions

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[7] Ray H. Simpson, "Use of Teacher Self-Evaluative Tools for the Improvement of Instruction," in Improvement of Instruction in Higher Education, AACTE Study Series Number 6, Washington, D.C.: AACTE 1962; 49-62.

could be either teacher-led or student-led. Reports might be made to the whole class verbally or to the teacher in writing. Many other techniques of evaluation exist. Only a small number have been presented here.

Evaluating the Effect of Instruction

At this point I wish to consider the approach to the effectiveness of instruction in terms of changing behavior or making better teachers of reading. To achieve this change is the heart of the problem. We may be superb college instructors from the standpoint of technique and methodology, but if we do not somehow aid the beginning teacher to become a better teacher of reading, we have in reality failed. This facet of our effectiveness is probably most difficult to evaluate for reasons mentioned earlier. It is, nevertheless, our paramount interest--or should be.

Again, the question of the function of a preservice methods course needs to be raised. If we seek to turn out a finished product who is an excellent teacher of reading and who is knowledgeable and skillful in all areas of reading, we will evaluate certain aspects. If, on the other hand, our course is intended to make a start towards building in the young teacher some basic understandings about reading instruction, we direct evaluation to other matters. And again evaluation must be made in the light of the quality of student who began the program.

It seems needless to point out that the purpose of education is to change behavior and that the behavior change through any preservice reading course must be directed toward turning out teachers who know what they are about when they teach reading. However, I am unaware of any one course, or even several courses in reading that turns out a finished product. Even though there are fifty hours of instruction or more a preservice reading course can be only a beginning towards creating an effective reading teacher.

It may be unnacessary to point out that a course ought to be evaluated in terms of its objectives. It is doubtful that we can or should address ourselves to specific behavioral objectives for <u>all</u> reading methods courses. These objectives may vary markedly with the particular school and the unique student population. There are probably some rather general goals toward which all instructors of undergraduate professional reading courses are striving. All of us, I think, have some similar bodies of knowledge which we would like our students to understand. Most of us, too, would agree on certain desirable behaviors as outcomes. We would hope when the terms phonics, structural analysis and syllabication were heard, the student would know what these meant and have some ability in teaching the skills involved. We would probably like to see dedicated, professionally-minded individuals

who keep abreast of current trends in reading by subscribing to and studying periodical literature. We would like all students to be members of IRA and to be actively involved in local councils.

Already you can see that there are several points at which we may evaluate the attainment of our goals for a preservice course as well as several kinds of objectives. In some instances it may be relatively easy to determine whether a particular aim has been achieved. Objectives which measure specific knowledge can be rather easily tested through some sort of examination. It is readily possible to discover whether students can verbalize or record factual information.

It may be feasible, too, to determine by means of problem-oriented tests whether we have helped college students understand the intricacies of certain teaching-learning situations in reading. Such tests call for more skillful development and analysis on the part of the insturctor than those which require factual recall. They may give us insight into the students' ability to apply skills rather than restate facts.

Perhaps another evaluation of whether we have attained our objectives is to query our students directly. This we might do in two ways: first, through an open-ended question, students might be asked to tell what they believe the objectives of a given course are; second, where objectives have been explicitly stated, these

might be listed and students asked whether they think the aims have been achieved and to what degree. These procedures yield information only on what students <u>think</u> relative to the objectives of a course. They do not reveal whether the objectives have actually been attained. Nevertheless, if students <u>feel</u> they've been helped toward the achievement of some goal or have not been helped toward it, this information is revealing to the instructor.

We are probably agreed that the true measure of the effectiveness of a preservice course is to be found only in what occurs in the students' classrooms, later.

Information about the effectiveness of former students in teaching reading might be sought in various ways. Although follow-up visits to classrooms are time consuming, they can give feedback unobtainable by any other means. Through observation and follow-up interview, the instructor may glean patterns of behavior that suggest general strengths and shortcomings. These <u>may</u> be attributable to the course, although one must be cautious in reaching that conclusion.

Interviews with principals, reading consultants and supervisory personnel relative to the limitations they observe in your students may be helpful. Particularly is this true if there is a pattern of strengths or weaknesses identified by several observers.

If follow-up visits to all students are not possible, scheduled observations of some within a convenient distance may be arranged.

Follow-up questionnaires to former students asking them to name areas in which they feel especially well- or especially ill-prepared may also be of value. Similar questions to their supervisors or consultants may supplement this information.

In practice, observations of reading lessons during the student-teaching experience are usually more feasible. If the instructor of the preservice course also supervises student-teachers, he has a ready and constant source of feedback. If he does not supervise directly, a close liaison with the supervisor of student-teachers would be most beneficial. Occasional discussion in student-teaching seminars led by the methods class instructor could focus on the problems being encountered in teaching reading. However, it is my opinion that feedback from student-teachers is neither as accurate nor as reliable as that obtained after the student has left the college and is teaching on his own. A primary reason is that the student-teacher is often required to follow through with the methods of the classroom teacher. Thus the college instructor does not always observe what the student would do on his own, but only how he follows the example of the cooperating teacher.

Research on Effectiveness of Various Techniques

For the college instructor who is interested in weighing whether one approach to teaching the reading course is more effective than another, a more rigorous type of data collection appears essential. The rigor of the procedures for data collection depends upon how generalizable the instructor wishes his results to be. Perhaps one might begin by looking closely at one topic covered in the course and determining which way of teaching that particular topic is more efficient in achieving the objectives for that segment of the course. For example, the college teacher may wish to investigate whether programming phonic skills for his students is a more effective means of getting that knowledge across than some other method he has been using. The understandings and factual recall for both procedures could be measured through some criterion test.

A somewhat more rigorous investigation might begin with the random assignment of students into one of two courses in each of which a different approach to the area of reading instruction was to be used. Various criterion measures would be essential to get at cognitive and affective learning.

We must be cautious in interpreting findings from any such study. We must be wary of falling into the trap of thinking that there will be one method, one technique, or one approach best for

all students in our class. While individual differences in learning ability and learning style are great at the six year old level, they are far more so at the college level.

Summary

This paper has attempted to look at some of the problems involved in evaluating a preservice methods course and at some of the means by which the instruction in the course itself might be evaluated for the instructor's own growth. Several suggestions for judging whether the objectives of the course have been achieved, an approach to evaluating the course through classroom performance, and two suggestions for research studies followed. A final word of caution--all of these procedures have drawbacks. Evaluation can be discomforting. There are trade offs in time and energy. Even so it is essential that college instructors utilize one or more evaluation procedures in order to obtain feedback which will enable them to improve their courses. In this manner we can do what we ask our students to do--engage in self-evaluation and develop an ability to change.